

Histories of Blue

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Traducteur : Simon Pleasance



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RÉFÉRENCE

Jacquemin, Frédérique. *Histoire du bleu*, Paris : Noesis, 2000

Pastoureau, Michel. *Bleu : histoire d'une couleur*, Paris : Ed. du Seuil, 2000

- 1 It is probably a tall order to assert that, of all the colours there are, blue is the one that painters are most attached to, but, for historians, it is still an object of analysis that has long been prompting a host of questions and comments. The recent books by Frédérique Jacquemin and Michel Pastoureau are evidence of as much, both establishing, as they do, and in an almost simultaneous way, a history of blue, inviting us to grasp the rich symbolism of this colour, and the many different uses made of it down the ages.
- 2 The 200-odd pages of Frédérique Jacquemin's book usher us into the specific world of a colour whose subtle shades were so admired by Rainer Maria Rilke, and about which he dreamed that an author might one day write a biography. The term used by the Austrian poet is a precious one—blue is indeed a living matter, which merits our attention. Better still, it appears to him like a specific being and, by this token, eligible for a biography. So this is the challenge that the author takes up, and which leads him to construct his synopsis. In the twenty or so short chapters devoted to it, blue appears in all its disconcerting diversity. In Cleopatra's eye shadow, stained-glass windows in churches, and painters' canvases, it finds the wherewithal of its most comprehensive sphere of influence. Its virtues, secrets and misfortunes punctuate a history where warmongering deeds—those involving madder- and woad-merchants—relativize the angelism with which Matisse was fond of associating this colour. Ultramarine blue hallows the Virgins of Fra Angelico, but once it became indigo, it marked American history with the fateful seal of slavery. Frédérique Jacquemin's analysis is based, as we can see, as much on examples taken from art history as from history, period. Herein lies its main merit. The analysis is

embarked upon with some interesting proposals but, like the foreword and the short poetic anthology which are the book's opening gambits, the body of the text itself comes across like a sampling, which may leave more attentive and exacting readers a trifle disappointed. The works with incomplete captions feature in a not very usable list, a charge that can also, sadly, be levelled at the index of names, which are listed without page numbers. Despite these flaws, the book does stick to its brief, and is, as a result, engaging enough, offering, as it does, an itinerary that is plentifully and interestingly illustrated.

- 3 *Bleu : histoire d'une couleur*, by the historian Michel Pastoureau, is a study that is at once highly structured and deeply informed. Its plan is clear to see and the writing concise. Straightaway the author gets us to grasp and understand colour-blue, as it happens—within a distinctly historical perspective, and not, as is too often the case, with a purely neurobiological axe to grind. Colour, as a cultural construct rather than a natural phenomenon, and a societal fact rather than any cross-cultural truth, belongs to social history, and, like other colours, blue is an object of rules and regulations and challenges, which the author strives to describe throughout his fine survey. Based on every manner of document—not restricted to the pictorial and artistic arena—, Michel Pastoureau's analysis of the colour in question takes note of the development of the language attaching to it, as well as of the various tastes and fashions which at times appear as moralizing phenomena, no less. The use of blue may, actually, also be as much a symbol of barbarism as of the most refined of civilizations, depending on the period. Its emergence, incidentally, is a lengthy one. Clothing and iconography alike would overlook its value, and its beauty even more so, for a long time. It had no uses during the prehistoric period, with the egregious exception of Egypt, and was only little used by the Romans. It played no part in liturgists' activities, and was barely dabbled in during the early Middle Ages, but blue would one day finally burst forth in the magnificent stained-glass windows of the Gothic age. Abbot Suger gave it his full backing, and in the name of his illuminating faith, encouraged its promotion, despite the colour-shy choices of Clairvaux. From then on, blue found its way into both imagery and customs. The fitting and relevant illustrations offered in this book help us to discover its swift development which would never falter again. Images of the Virgin Mary, annunciations, presentations at the temple—the whole iconography of the Marian cult sprang up under the aegis of the colour blue, which, economically speaking, also enjoyed a constant growth. Time, then, for the war between red dyers and blue dyers, a war that would only draw to a close when dyeing techniques were sufficiently evolved and the vogue for blue was thoroughly guaranteed. From blue as a royal attribute to the blue that worship, art and clothing fashion would shortly choose, there was room for every manner of practice and taste. Romanticism would keenly espouse it, as would the political order, whose coats-of-arms, cockades and flags all contained the new values it was intent on conveying. The political and military effectiveness of blue then came to the fore. The Revolution was anything but indifferent to its symbolic power, and the same went for all those armies which, sooner rather than later, would adopt this colour for its protective virtues. In this respect, the author shrewdly reminds us that the delay with which the French army traded its red trousers for blue, lay, in 1914, at the root of many a bloodbath on the battlefield. Well before Prussian blue clashed with the “blue horizon”, the young Levi Strauss cut the imperial jean from the blue canvas of his tent. This would in no time oust all other sartorial blues—uniforms, overalls, work clothes—and henceforth clad young people the world over, and in this strange conformism these same young people were nevertheless bound to find the

symbol of their emancipation. From Picasso to Klein, by way of Eluard and Monory, the blue period was not restricted just to artists, poets and musicians. Today more than ever, blue is the colour of social consensus. Election campaign posters all use it as their background, as do all those flags that flutter over nations and countries. It is to such lines of thought that Michel Pastoureau's beautiful book invites its readers.